

**“Thirsty for Results: Lessons Learned from the District of
Columbia’s Lead Contamination Experience”**

Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis

Committee on Government Reform

2154 Rayburn House Office Building

Friday, May 21, 2004 at 10:00 am

Welcome to today’s hearing entitled “Thirsty for Results: Lessons Learned from the District of Columbia’s Lead Contamination Experience.”

On March 5, 2004, this Committee held a hearing to review the condition of lead contamination in the District of Columbia water supply and to examine Federal and local governmental agencies’ responsibilities for drinking water safety in the District of Columbia and surrounding jurisdictions.

After the hearing, the Committee requested additional information from the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Washington Aqueduct, and the District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority regarding specific actions taken by each agency to combat the elevated lead levels in the District water system. These agencies have taken a number of steps to address this situation, including supplying water filters to affected District residents, additional testing of residences, schools, and libraries, blood screening for affected children under six and pregnant and nursing women, and expanded public outreach. While each agency is taking additional steps to fix the problem, the Committee will continue to consider how elevated lead levels in the District’s drinking water could have been prevented and whether the current response adequately protects public health.

There are still unanswered questions. What caused the spike in lead levels in the D.C. area? Did the responsible agencies adequately consider research on the use of chloramines before introducing them into the water system? Is the lead testing protocol adequate? Is the current public information campaign effective? Has WASA complied with EPA’s requests? Are those requests appropriate? And lastly, is there cause for more widespread concern in jurisdictions around the nation?

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton recently introduced H.R.4268, the Lead-Free Drinking Water Act of 2004, which would amend the Safe Drinking Water Act intended to ensure that the District of Columbia and States provide a safe and lead free supply of drinking water. The legislation attempts to address the concerns that were raised by the lead crisis in the District of Columbia. This legislation would impose new responsibilities on EPA and water utilities nationwide.

The purpose of this hearing is twofold. First, we intend to address the current status of the lead problem in the District -- its causes and the governmental responses,

including reformulation of the water, lead service line replacement, and communications with the public.

Second, we will focus on whether the current Safe Drinking Water program is adequate to assure safe drinking water for the consuming public both in the District of Columbia and across the nation, or whether additional measures, either legislative or regulatory, are necessary to accomplish that objective. I expect to explore whether the situation in the District of Columbia is indicative of water systems throughout the country or whether it is unique. That assessment will assist in determining whether the experience in the District of Columbia justifies changes to the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Part of this process necessarily includes an examination of the scope of the problem (as suggested by the District's experience), the costs and benefits that additional requirements would impose on water systems across the country, and the possible trade-offs between expenditures for lead-free drinking water and for other programs that protect the public health, safety, and welfare.

We have a distinguished panel of witnesses before us. We have gathered major players and advocates who are well versed on the lead issue. I look forward to hearing their testimony on how we can move forward to assure that all residents in the Capital region and across the country have safe drinking water.

Our witnesses will discuss federal regulations concerning the monitoring of lead levels in drinking water, the status of the District of Columbia's drinking water lead levels and remediation efforts, and their assessments of the need for changes in the current federal regulation of lead in the nation's drinking water supply.